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ABSTRACT

This report provides an overview of the numbers, characteristics, and economic situation of lone-parent families in the European Community. The report aims to take at least a first step toward providing information that would enable policy-makers to address the problems faced by single-parent families. The report concludes that women's responsibility for child care was a major cause of economic inequality between men and women. Chapter 1 of the report provides a summary of the European community. The first part presents a definition of lone parenthood, the marital status of parents, household situations, dependent children, and a resulting "standard" definition for lone parenthood. The second part presents statistics and league tables on lone parent families. The third part details the labor force survey as a source of information. The final part addresses the economic situation of the families, including sources of income and poverty data. The report's second chapter presents sketches of individual countries to provide an overview of the status of lone-parent families and to highlight new developments. Sketches are provided for Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Spain, France, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, and the United Kingdom. The final chapter provides a summary and conclusions relating to the numbers, policies, and areas for further exploration, including the differing training needs of single parents in different countries. (Author/SD)

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A Report to the European Commission

Jo Roll.

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Lone Parent Families in the European Community

(ISBN 1 874791 00 7)

Corrections

Page 8, Table 1, Notes:
The last note should read: The number of lone fathers in the Luxembourg sample was too small to be reliable.

Page 9, Table 3, Notes:
The definition of a lone parent used in the table is 'one adult living on his or her own with a child or children. The ages and marital status of the child(ren) are not specified.'

Page 15, Table 7, Notes:
Note c) should read: Social Trends 21, 1991, Table 2.16, HMSO, provides this 1989 figure for England and Wales.

Page 24, in the first full paragraph:
'the old GDR (West)' should read 'the old FRG (West)';
'the old DDR (East)' should read 'the old GDR (East)'.

Lone Parent Families in the European Community

The 1992 Report to the European Commission

Jo Roll

European Family & Social Policy Unit

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Introduction: the purpose of the Report

This report is intended to provide an overview of the numbers, characteristics and economic situation of lone parent families in the European Community. It updates the information presented three years ago in a report for the European Commission's Action Programme on Equal Opportunities for Men and Women.[1]

The earlier report set out some of the reasons why lone parents raise 'equal opportunities' issues. Perhaps the most fundamental underlying reason was that the vast majority of them are women; if the numbers are measured accurately, this report shows that the total is probably nine out of ten.

The proportion of female lone parents does not appear to have declined in recent years. Indeed, as the proportion of divorced, separated and never-married lone parents has risen at the expense of the widowed, the proportion of lone mothers has, if anything, increased.

This simple fact illustrates all too clearly that, in spite of all the social changes that have taken place in recent years and in spite of changing expectations about the roles of men and women, it is still women who are chiefly responsible for bringing up children.

The report concluded that women's responsibility for child care was a major cause of economic inequality between men and women. However, some would argue that this only becomes a serious problem when there is no partner to provide the economic support while others would argue that financial dependence within marriages (or similar relationships) is both undesirable in itself and in that it places the woman in a vulnerable position if the couple splits up.

Whatever the merits of these arguments, the report concluded that, given the fact that most lone mothers are divorced or separated, were financial dependence within marriage to disappear, the financial problems faced by many lone mothers would be greatly reduced. It is even possible that fewer lone parents would be formed as a result of greater equality within marriage.

A strategy for achieving this could also benefit unmarried mothers and lone fathers as it would in some way have to solve the problem of combining care for children with an independent income for the carer, either by providing the carer with a social benefit or by providing good quality child care services which would free the carer for employment.

A fundamental question posed by the report was therefore: if the financial difficulties faced by lone parents are to be alleviated, to what extent should policies target lone parents and to what extent should they target the broader groups of which they are a part, such as families with children, low paid workers, and, given the 'equal opportunities' context of the report, women in particular?

This report is intended to be descriptive rather than prescriptive and it does not attempt answers to such questions. But it does aim to take at least a first step towards providing the information which would enable policy-makers to formulate their own answers and these may be different for different types of policy.

Very few countries publish annual, or even regular, statistics about lone parent families so that, three years on from the last report, new information is extremely patchy. However, Eurostat have kindly carried out some special analyses of the Labour Force Survey for this report and some of the national experts were able to carry out special analyses of national surveys.

This report is intended to be free-standing so that, where necessary, it incorporates some of the earlier information in summary form. Like the earlier one, it only provides an overview and, although it recognises the diversity of lone parent families within countries, it does not examine the different groups of lone parents in detail.

Sadly, as in so many international reports,

1 Lone Parent Families in the European Community (V/545/89/)

the conclusion points to the lack of information. At the moment there is not even a consistent series of EC figures about the numbers of lone parent families and it therefore seems highly desirable that the EC Labour Force Survey should be adapted for this purpose.

The conclusion to this report also identifies several types of policy about which it would be useful to collect more information. This includes not only those policies targeted at lone parents but also the specific impact on lone parents of broader policies.

The extent to which the EC Commission should be involved in social policies is contentious. However, although the collection of more information in the areas identified would be useful if the Commission were to develop or extend its policies in those areas, it would also be useful if the Commission were simply to encourage the exchange of information for the benefit of Member States.

Jo Roll
Family Policy Studies Centre
January 1992

1 European Community overview

Definition

What is a lone parent?

What is it that this report is trying to count and to characterise? It might seem a strange question but, not only is there no internationally recognised definition of a lone parent, within most Member States there is no standard definition either.

The question is by no means a purely academic or philosophical one. Different approaches to measuring the numbers have dramatically different results, as Tables 1, 2 and 3 illustrate. Denmark, for example, has the largest number, 31%, in Table 1 but one of the lowest numbers, 4%, in Table 3, whereas in Table 2, it ranks somewhere in the middle. Similarly, Ireland is top of the list in Table 2 but bottom in Table 3.

Without going into all the details of the different definitions used (these are summarised in the notes to the Tables), it is clear from the titles that the tables each measure different things. Table 1 is concerned with lone parents as a proportion of households with children under age 18, Table 2 uses all households as the base, and Table 3, the total 'adult' population.

The characteristics of lone parents and the policy implications also partly depend on the definition used. According to the 1981 Belgian Census, for example, a quarter of lone parents are over 65 years old. But is this really the sort of family over which there has been concern?

At least one of the reasons that lone parent families have been the focus of attention is that they are rearing children. Elderly widows and widowers living with their unmarried adult children may be of interest but they generally raise a different set of issues, not least because they may be financially dependent on the 'child' rather than the other way round.

The appropriate definition is likely to vary according to the purpose in hand. Here, concern centres on the financial situation of lone parent families and the definition chosen has been influenced by the 'Friis' report on 'One Parent Families and Poverty', published by the Commission in 1982 as part of the first European Poverty Programme (see **Standard definition** below).

If the aim is to work towards a common definition, it also seems sensible to build on existing EC work rather than to start afresh each time. However, the Friis definition is not totally uncontroversial and, what is more serious for comparative purposes, elements are ambiguous. For this report, it has therefore been slightly modified.

However, the discussions about its main elements provide a good illustration of the issues that arise in comparative research of this kind. They can be divided into three, those relating to:

- the marital status of the parent,
- the family's household situation,
- the definition of a dependent child.

Marital status of the parent

The interest in lone parent families stems from the assumption that they are distinct from two parent families – a point which may seem obvious but which is debatable. For example, there is the argument that, depending on the way that couples share resources and divide their labour, the situation of a mother within a couple may be similar to that of a lone mother. Alternatively, from the child's point of view, it is argued that all children have (or have had) two parents, regardless of whether that parent lives with them.

However, there continues to be an interest in families where only one parent lives with the child on the grounds that s/he is far more likely to have to act both as primary breadwinner and primary carer than a parent living in a couple.

The question then is who is to be included in this group: widows and widowers? those who are divorced and separated? those who

Table 1 Lone parents in the EC Labour Force Survey 1989

	Percentage of households with children under age 18 which are headed by lone mothers and lone parents	
	Lone mothers	Lone parents
	%	%
Belgium	8	10
Denmark	28	31
Germany	10	12
Greece	4	5
Spain	5	6
France	10	11
Ireland	8	9
Italy	5	7
Luxembourg	8	*
Netherlands	9	12
Portugal	8	10
UK	14	15
Eur 12	**9**	**11**

Source Eurostat: Labour Force Survey 1989: Special Analysis carried out by the EC Statistical Office

Notes
- Lone parents who live in the household of others are not included. To that extent these figures underestimate the number of lone parents. On the other hand, they do not exclude all those who are cohabiting, nor some with a temporarily absent spouse (although the survey covers those who are normally resident in the household so that there should be few of the latter) and to that extent they overestimate the number of lone parents.
- Because of rounding and some 'no replies' the numbers shown in the table do not sum to 100 exactly.
- A star * in the table indicates that the numbers in the sample were too small to be reliable. (In this table the figures for lone mothers and lone fathers were added together which is why there is no total for Luxembourg.)

Table 2 Lone parents in 'A Social Portrait of Europe' (National Censuses 1981-2)

	Percentage of all households who are lone parents
	%
Belgium	7
Denmark	7
Germany	6
Greece	-
Spain	6
France	4
Ireland	9
Italy	8
Luxembourg	7
Netherlands	6
Portugal	-
UK	8

Source Eurostat, A Social Portrait of Europe, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 1991 (based on national Censuses 1981-82)

have never married? In practice most statistical sources show the number of lone parents in each marital status group as well as the total number. But the concept of a lone parent usually assumes that, whatever their differences, all these categories have something in common which warrants a common label.

The issue does not end there, however. In some countries it has become increasingly common for parents to live together ('cohabit') without getting legally married. The Friis report, and many of the experts who contributed to this report, considered that 'cohabiting' parents should not be classified as lone parents and, where possible, this is the approach that has been adopted here.

This view assumes that although there may be legal, and real, differences between cohabiting couples and married ones, the similarities outweigh the differences. Nevertheless, it should be noted that in most countries the legal obligations of cohabiting couples towards each other – although not usually towards their children – are different from those of married ones.

In practice, collecting information about cohabitation can be a major problem as many statistical sources do not identify, or do not adequately identify, cohabiting couples. The increase in cohabitation also affects the classification of lone parents as those who have split up are sometimes grouped with the 'never-married' and sometimes with the 'separated and divorced'.

There is also the question of the lone parent who finds a new partner. Because such parents are no longer alone, most definitions would exclude them. But some doubts have been raised about this convention. For example, the child might still feel that s/he lives with 'one' parent only, and in many countries the financial responsibility for the child still rests with the natural parent (unless the new one actually adopts the child). However, while recognising these issues, this report follows the convention that those who have repartnered no longer qualify as 'lone parent families'.

Table 3 Lone parents in the European Omnibus Survey 1987

	Percentage of the adult population living in a lone parent household
	%
Belgium	7
Denmark	4
Germany	5
Greece	3
Spain	5
France	5
Ireland	3
Italy	5
Luxembourg	4
Netherlands	5
Portugal	4
UK	6
Eur 12	**5**

Source European Omnibus Survey (Eurobarometer) 1987

Notes – Adults are defined as those aged 15 or more.
– The definition of a lone parent is that of 1 adult living on his or her own with a child or children (marital status ages are not specified). It excludes those who live with anyone other than their own children.

The household situation

According to the Friis definition, the child must live with the parent concerned. This could create a dilemma where a child spends equal time with each parent. Should both, or neither, be defined as a lone parent?

In practice this does not seem to be a major issue. But, if genuine sharing of children were to become commonplace, it would become more serious and the analogy with a widow or widower, and therefore the very concept of lone parent, would be called into question.

The Friis definition also assumes that it is the lack of a partner which is significant and that other adults who happen to live with the lone parent, or with whom the lone parent happens to live, do not affect the definition. Lone parents living in their own parents' home, for example, may in practice receive a good deal of financial and practical support but it cannot therefore be assumed that they do not bear the ultimate responsibility for caring and providing for the child.

In practice, however, this group is sometimes hard to identify because of the way that statistics are collected. Many sources only identify the relationships to the 'household head' (or 'reference person'). Other children in the household, for example, may not be attributed to anybody. However, where precise figures are not available, it is sometimes possible to arrive at an estimate of the number in this group.

There are several other practical difficulties which fall under this heading. For example, some sources only count those present in the household on the night of the Census or survey, so that some parents with temporarily absent spouses may be misclassified as lone parents.

This is not such a problem where a survey asks about people normally resident in a household (as most of those used here do), although, even then, there may be some borderline cases, for example, where one partner works in another country for long periods of time. Prisoners' wives represent a similar issue.

However, for the purposes of this report, it was not considered practical to refine the definition to cover all such points, so that some inconsistencies in the results are likely to have resulted although it is hoped that they are generally small.

Dependent child

The word dependent' in this context usually implies that the child is still in some sense being 'reared' but also that the child is **financially** dependent. But this still leaves room for interpretation – which might not matter if there was a clear concept of a dependent child for policy purposes in each country.

In that case, although one country might define 'dependent' as 'up to school-leaving age', another might include teenagers who have entered the labour force as long as their income is below a certain level, and another might use the age of 25 as the cut-off point, these could all be taken as equivalent in that they represented a clear-cut concept of 'dependence' in each country.

Unfortunately, the variety of concepts used within some countries is almost as great as the differences between them.

Rather than trying to define 'dependence' precisely, a simple alternative is to use an age limit. However, even a simple age limit is controversial.

For example, if most young people leave school at the minimum age – say 16 – and earn an independent living, it might be appropriate to use 16 as the cut-off point. But in a country where

there is a high level of youth unemployment and where many young people are not entitled to benefits until they are 25, for example, it may be more appropriate to use the age of 25.

The disadvantage of a high age limit for capturing the idea of a dependent child is that it increases the probability that the 'dependency' is reversed. For example, the "lone parent" may be an elderly widow who has moved in with her financially independent son or daughter rather than the other way round.

In practice, this problem takes an extreme form in some national Censuses which define lone parents as those living with unmarried children of any age (like the Belgian one mentioned at the beginning of this section).

The higher the age limit used, the more necessary it is to have additional information in order to judge whether the child really is 'dependent'. Only a few surveys provide this kind of information. For the purposes of this report, therefore, dependent children are defined as those under age 18 – which is the age of majority in most countries. (There is a case for saying that it should be unmarried children under age 18 only but it is not thought that this distinction would make a large difference to the totals.)

This is not to suggest that 'under 18' perfectly represents dependency but that, given the sources available for this report, it is likely to be the closest fit (although not all the figures have in fact been provided using precisely this cut-off). There is, also, in theory, an advantage in using an age limit rather than dependency. For example, if the data are available, it is then possible to judge whether the children of lone parents are likely to remain dependent longer than children of couples or vice versa.

The 'standard' definition

The 'standard' and 'target' definition for this report is therefore:

A parent who

- **is NOT living in a couple (meaning either a married or a cohabiting couple)**
- **may or may not be living with others (e.g. friends or own parents)**
- **is living with at least one child under 18 years old.**

This is similar to the 'Friis' definition, that is the one used in 'One Parent Families and Poverty in the EEC' (V/2541/2/82), except that a child 'under 18 years old' has been substituted for a 'dependent' child.

This is not to say that the above definition is ideal, simply that, given the aim of comparability and the limits of existing sources, one practical definition had to be chosen. Indeed, given existing controversies, if more data were available, it would be useful to collect comparable information using several different definitions.

Ultimately, the definition of a lone parent is only meaningful if it represents an object of social concern. At the moment there does appear to be concern about families as defined above. However, as the variety of family situations multiplies – there are as many children living in stepfamilies as in lone parent families in some countries, for example – the simple dichotomy between a family with one parent and a family with two parents may become less appropriate.

Numbers

League tables

For the 1989 report, it was possible to draw up a tentative 'league table' of the number of lone parent families, which is reproduced for reference below. Details are set out in Table 4.

Estimates of the number of lone parent families as a proportion of all families with children under age 18 in the mid-1980s, from the 1989 Report on Lone Parent Families in the European Community:

14%	**Denmark, UK**
12-13%	**Germany, France**
10-12%	**Belgium, Luxembourg, Netherlands**
5-10%	**Spain, Ireland, Italy, Portugal**
Under 5%	**Greece**

The amount of new information available for this report was very varied. The basic number of lone parent families could be updated by eight out of the twelve Member States, but far fewer than that could provide further details, and some of the new figures were not precisely comparable with the old. It therefore seemed more appropriate to set out much of this information on a country by country basis, together with the reports about policy changes (see Part Two).

Table 4 Estimating the number of lone parent families in the mid 1980s: proportion of all families with children under age 18

	Percentage[a]	Sources and variations from the 'standard'[b] definition
Belgium	15%	1981 Census: Includes all unmarried children of any age and cohabiting couples
	11%	1981 Census: As above but youngest child aged under 21
	6%	1985 Survey by CSP, Antwerp[1]: Only those living without other adults and 'dependent' children (i.e. under age 25, with no income from employment or replacement income)
	10-12%	*This was one of the hardest estimates to make as the available figures differed widely. The 15% and 11% were both assumed to be overestimates. However, by the mid 1980s, there would probably have been a rise in the proportion of lone parent families (suggested by the demographic data in Tables 8 and 9) which might more or less cancel out the overestimate.* *It was difficult to reconcile the 6% figure with this estimate. It was clearly too low because it excluded lone parents living in the household of others but surprising that it was so much lower than 11%. Extra data from this survey provided for the 1992 report shows that, if lone parents living with others are included, the total was 8% which would suggest that 10–12% might have been an overestimate.*
Denmark	***14%***	*1985-6 Omnibus Surveys[2]: 'Standard' definition*
F R Germany	13%	1986 Mikrozensus[3]: 'Standard' definition except that cohabiting couples are included.
	12-13%	*The number of cohabiting couples is estimated to be about 5% of lone parent families. The Mikrozensus figure of 13.4% is therefore only a small overestimate on account of this – less than 1%.*
Greece	***Under 5%***	*There are no official Greek figures for the number of lone parent families but figures on the number of divorces involving children and births outside marriage suggest that the figure is almost certainly very low.*
Spain	11%	1981 Census: Includes all unmarried children of any age (like the 15% figure for Belgium above) but excludes lone parents who are not 1 adult households.
	5-10%	*Although it excludes some lone parents, overall the Census figure is likely to overestimate the number of lone parent families.*
France	13%	1987 Labour Force Survey (Enquête Emploi[4]) Excludes lone parents living in the household of others. Children are defined as under age 25.
	12-13%	*The precise figure in the Enquête Emploi was 12.6%. 1989 data (see Table 5) suggest that defining children as under age 25 produces an overestimate compared with under 18. However, the ommission of "hidden" lone parents is likely to produce an underestimate.*
Ireland	7%	1981 Census: Excludes lone parents living in the household of others but includes cohabiting couples; children up to age 15.
	5-10%	*It was assumed that the elements of over and underestimation probably balanced out and that, even if the proportion had risen by the mid 1980s, the figure would still be in the 5-10% range. New data for 1986 (see Table 11) suggests that this is the case.*
Italy	6%	1983 ISTAT survey[5]: the definition used was effectively the 'standard' one.
	5-10%	*Demographic data suggested that there would have been little change between 1983 and 1985.*

table continues on page 12

Luxembourg	10	1985 CEPS Panel Study[6]: The definition used was close to the 'standard' one but children aged 16 and 17 not in full-time education were excluded.
	10-12%	
Netherlands	10%	1985 WBO Survey[7]: The definition used was effectively the 'standard' one (see Table 11).
	10-12%	
Portugal	11%	1981 Census: Includes all unmarried children of any age.
	5%	1981 Census: Only children under age 7 included.
	5-10%	*The first figure is an overestimate, and, if as in most other countries, the majority of lone parents were divorced and separated, the second figure would be an underestimate because divorced and separated lone parents are less likely to have a very young child.*
UK	***14%***	*1985 General Household Survey[8]: The definition was close to the 'standard' one but children aged 16,17 not in full-time education are excluded and those aged 18 in full-time secondary education are included.*

Notes
a) Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number but account was taken of the original figure when placing the countries within bands.
b) The 'standard' definition is described in Part One.

Sources
1) The 1985 Panel Study was carried out by the Centre for Social Policy at the University of Antwerp. It was based on about 6,500 households.
2) Danish Omnibus Surveys are carried out by the Danish National Institute of Social Research and the Danish National Bureau of Statistics 3 times a year. They use a nationwide sample of 2,000 people aged 16 and over.
3) The German Mikrozensus is a mini official Census (and therefore mandatory) conducted every April and based on a 1% sample of the population.
4) The French 'Enquetes Emploi' are official surveys conducted annually and based on a 1 in 300 sample of the population.
5) The Italian survey into 'Family Behaviour and Structure' was carried out for the first time in 1983 by ISTAT, the official statistical office. It was based on a national sample of 28,408 families. in 1988 ISTAT conducted a more general Omnibus survey which provides some information on lone parent families and this was used for the 1992 report.
6) The Luxembourg "Panel" survey was carried out by the Centre d'Etudes de Populations, de Pauvrete et de Politiques Socio-Economiques. It was based on a sample of 2,013 households in 1985.
7) The Dutch Woningbehoeften Onderzoek (Housing Needs Survey) is a national survey carried out by the Central Statistical Bureau every four years. In 1985 the sample size was 54,342 "cases".
8) The British General Household Survey is carried out annually by the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys. It excludes Northern Ireland and is based on a sample of 12,500 households.

However, this time it has been possible to supplement the figures provided by national experts with figures provided by Eurostat from a special analysis of the 1989 Labour Force Survey, using a definition close to, but unfortunately not the same as, the 'standard' one (see **Labour Force Survey as a source of information** below). The results are presented in Tables 1 and 5 and discussed below.

Although it has not been possible to draw up a league table exactly comparable with the old one, it is possible to make some statements about the numbers at the turn of the decade as compared with the mid 1980s. However, as before, the figures are tentative and should be treated with caution. Details are set out in Table 5 and are summarised below.

Estimates of the number of lone parent families as a proportion of all families with children under age 18 at the end of the 1980s:

17%	**UK**
15%	**Denmark**
11-13%	**France, Germany**
9-11%	**Belgium, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal**
5-6%	**Greece, Spain, Italy**

One of the largest rises appears to have taken place in the UK, which was already joint top of the league with Denmark. It has now pulled ahead to 17% in 1989 (and 19% in 1990), largely due to a rise in the 'never-married' group. The

Table 5 Estimating the number of lone parent families at the end of the 1980s: proportion of families with children under age 18

	Percentage	Sources and variations from the 'standard' definition
Belgium	9%	1988 CSP Panel Study[1]; the definition is the 'standard' one apart from the fact that 'dependent' children include those up to age 25 who have no income from employment or benefits.
		Between 1985 and 1988 the proportion of lone parents rose from 7.8% to 8.6% (new figures for 1985 provided for this report).
	10%	1989 Labour Force Survey – see Table 1.
Denmark	15%	1990-91 Omnibus Survey[2]: 'standard' definition.
		Between 1985-6 and 1990-91 the proportion of lone parent families rose from 14.0% to 14.8%.
	31%	1989 Labour Force Survey – see Table 1. Family allowance statistics show roughly equal proportion of cohabiting couples with children and lone parent families which means that the LFS figure, which includes cohabiting couples, contains double the 'true' number of lone parent families. The Omnibus Survey also shows that very few lone parents in Denmark live in the household of others.
F R Germany	13%	1989 Mikrozensus; the definition is the 'standard' one except that it includes cohabiting couples (see Table 4).
		Between 1986 and 1989 the percentage of lone parents stayed more or less constant at 13.4% in 1986 and 13.5% in 1989 (13.6% and 13.8% in 1987 and 1988 respectively).
	12%	1989 Labour Force Survey – see Table 1. (The LFS in Germany is a sub-sample of the Mikrozensus.
Greece	5%	1989 Labour Force Survey – see Table 1.
Spain	6%	1989 Labour Force Survey – see Table 1.
France	13%	1989 Labour Force Survey; excludes lone parent families 'hidden' in the household of others and children are defined as under age 25.
	11%	1989 Labour Force Survey; definition as above but children under age 18.
		Acccording to the LFS, the number of lone parent families with children under age 25 remained static at 12.6% in 1987 and 1989.
		The 11% may be an underestimate in so far as it excludes lone parents who are not household heads.
Ireland	9%	1986 Census: the definition includes cohabiting couples and temporarily absent spouses (the Census only measures those present on the day) but excludes those 'hidden' in the household of others. Children are defined as those under age 15.
	9%	1989 Labour Force Survey – see Table 1.
		The 1986 Census shows a rise over 1981, that is from 7.25 to 8.6%.
Italy	6%	1988 ISTAT (government statistical office) Omnibus Survey; 'standard' definition.
		The 1988 figure of 5.8% is little different from the 1983 figure which was 5.5%.
	7%	1989 Labour Force Survey – see Table 1.
Netherlands	10%	1989 WBO[7]:'standard' definition but excludes a few lone parents living in the household of others.

table contines on page 14

		The figure was 10.3% and there has been virtually no change since the 1985 WBO. However, a proportion of households with children are difficult to classify and it is possible that some of these have been classified differently each time. However, even if all such households were assumed to contain lone parent families with a child under age 18 (which is unlikely), the total this time would not rise by more than about 1 percentage point. Information for 1989 was provided by W. Relou at the Dutch Ministry of Housing.
	12%	1989 Labour Force Survey – see Table 1.
Portugal	10%	1989 Labour Force Survey – see Table 1.
UK	17%	1989 General Household Survey[8]; the definition is very close to the 'standard' one but children are defined as under 16 and 16-18 inclusive if they are in full-time, non-advanced education. There has been a rise of three percentage points from the 14% figure from the 1985 GHS quoted last time. Figures for 1990 show that the proportion rose again – to 19%.

Note For notes and details of sources, see Table 4.

situation in Denmark, on the other hand, remained relatively static; the proportions crept up from 14% to 15% (in 1990-91).

In France and Germany there appears to have been little change and these two countries probably still come next on the list, followed by a cluster of countries, Belgium, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Portugal.

Much lower proportions of lone parent families are to be found in Italy, Spain and Greece, although figures for the last two countries are particularly tentative as there is little information other than the Labour Force Survey, which has a number of drawbacks (see **Labour Force Survey as a source of information** below).

The earlier report showed that the growth in the number of lone parent families in the preceding decades had largely been due to divorce, separation and, to a lesser extent, to births outside marriage. The number of widows and widowers with dependent children had generally been falling and, on the 'standard' definition, formed a small proportion of the total.

Demographic statistics showing the proportion of births outside marriage and the divorce rate are therefore, in the absence of enough other information, sometimes taken as rough indicators of changes in the number of lone parent families.

Trends in births outside marriage and divorce are shown in Tables 6 and 7. The latest figures presented in the 1989 report are shown in the fourth column. The fifth column shows the latest comparable figures available at the time of writing this report.

These show that Denmark has by far the highest proportion of births outside marriage – about 45% – with France and the UK next, with roughly one in four births outside marriage. The lowest rates were in Greece and Spain.

As for divorce, Denmark again has the highest rate, although the UK is close behind. Ireland is the only country which does not allow divorce, although there have been changes to the law with regard to separation (see Part Two). Italy has by far the lowest divorce rate of the countries shown, but recent figures are not available for some of the other countries – Greece, Spain and Portugal – which have in the past had very low divorce rates.

These figures are only crude indicators of trends in the number of lone parent families and, in some cases, can be misleading. In Denmark, for example, national sources show that, although 45% of births were outside marriage, only 4-6% of all births were to a mother living without a partner. However, a discrepancy on this scale does appear to be unique to Denmark where cohabitation appears to be much more common than in other Member States.

The divorce figures can also be misleading in that they do not show the proportion of divorces which involve dependent children or the number of separations, either of married or of previously 'cohabiting' couples.

The number of lone parents is also affected by the rate at which they cease to be lone parents. Remarriage (or, in the case of the

Table 6 Births outside marriage per 1,000 live births

	1960	1970	1980	1985 or 1986	1988
Belgium	21	28	41	n.a.	89
Denmark	78	110	332	439	447
Germany	63	55	76	96	100
Greece	12	11	15	18	21
Spain	23	14	28	n.a.	80
France	61	68	114	219	263
Ireland	16	27	50	96	119
Italy	24	22	43	56	58
Luxembourg	32	40	60	102	121
Netherlands	14	21	41	88	101
Portugal	95	73	92	128	137
UK	52	80	115	210	251
Eur 12	**45**	**48**	**79**	**139**	**161**

Source Eurostat: Demographic Statistics 1991, Table E4

Notes In the 1988 column the Belgian figure is for 1987 and the Spanish figure for 1986.

Table 7 Divorces per 1,000 existing marriages

	1960	1970	1980	1986	1989
Belgium	2.0	2.6	5.6	7.3	8.6
Denmark	5.9	7.6	11.2	12.8	13.6
Germany	3.6	5.1	6.1	8.3	8.7(1988)
Greece	1.5(a)	1.7(a)	2.5(a)	-	-
Spain	-	-	1.1(b)	-	-
France	2.9	3.3	6.3	8.5	8.4
Ireland	0	0	0	0	0
Italy	-	1.3	0.8	1.1	2.1
Luxembourg	2.0	2.6	6.5	6.4	10.0
Netherlands	2.2	3.3	7.5	8.7	8.1
Portugal	0.4	0.2	2.8(b)	3.7(b)	
UK	2.0	4.7	12.0	12.9	12.7(c)

Notes a) 1961, 1971, 1981
b) Social Trends 18, 1988, Table 2.17, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, provides this figure for 1981 and 1985.
c) Social Trends 21, 1992, Table 2.10, HMSO, London, provides these figures for 1981 and 1985.

Source Eurostat: Demographic Statistics 1988 and 1991.

never-married, marriage) and 'cohabitation' rates are therefore also relevant.

Nevertheless, when used to supplement other sources of information, Eurostat's annual volume of demographic statistics can provide a useful check on other sources if used cautiously.

The Labour Force Survey as a source of information

The LFS is currently conducted every year in each Member State and aims to achieve comparability. Member States are required to collect a basic amount of information which they can supplement if they so choose. As a potential source of information about lone parent, and other, families it therefore provides the best hope for the future.

In spite of its potential, the LFS currently has some disadvantages as a source of information about lone parent families. Probably the two major ones relate to 'cohabitation' and to 'hidden' families (e.g. lone parents living in the home of their own parents or friends).

In relation to cohabitation, the LFS does not require each Member State to identify

'cohabiting' couples, although some attempt to do so. The extent to which 'cohabiting' couples are identified therefore depends on the way that the question(s) about marital status are worded and the attitudes of respondents, which may vary from one country to another. For example, some 'cohabiting' couples would describe themselves as spouses while others would not.

In relation to 'hidden' families, the units of analysis of the LFS are households and individuals – not families. The LFS therefore concentrates on relationships to the household 'head' or 'reference' person (although some Member States broaden the scope of their survey to include families within the household). The figures in Table 1 therefore only relate to families where the lone parent or one of the couple is the household 'head'.

However, the figures in Table 1 are presented as a proportion of households with children under 18 so that there is only a bias to the extent that lone parent families are more (or less) likely to be 'hidden' in the household of others than are couple families.

For a few countries, there is information from other sources about the proportion of 'hidden' families. For example, in Denmark and the Netherlands, other surveys suggest that there are very few. But where there is no such information (e.g. Spain, Portugal, Greece) it is not possible to judge whether there may be significant numbers of lone parents living with their own families who are not counted in the LFS.

Overall, the largest misestimate probably arises in the case of Denmark. According to other sources, it almost certainly has the highest proportion of babies born to cohabiting couples of any Member State. But, in the Danish LFS, families are identified according to their legal status, so that the figures in Table 1 grossly overestimate the number of lone parent families in Denmark, that is 31% of families with children, which is double the 15% , as measured on the 'standard' definition used for this report.

However, the reassuring aspect of this finding is that the overestimate is just about the size one would expect from the information provided in Part Two. The Danish information shows that there are roughly the same number of cohabiting couples with children as there are lone parents. Therefore, if cohabiting couples with children are included in the definition of a lone parent, the percentage of lone parents roughly doubles.

In some Member States, where the proportions of 'cohabiting' couples with children and of 'hidden' families are low, or where the two more or less cancel out, the LFS figures are much more accurate. Indeed, it seems likely that the Danish figure is the only one which is way out of line.

The UK figure, for example, is only a little below the figure provided in Part Two. The LFS figures on the full-time and part-time employment of lone mothers are almost exactly the same as the figures based on the 'standard' definition from other national sources, which suggests that the LFS serves as a rough but reasonable approximation for the UK at least. (Table 5 shows the estimates from the LFS compared with the results of other surveys, where these were available.)

However, in spite of the fact that the LFS provides the most comparable data on labour force participation, even these results need to be interpreted with caution. Because of different institutional, occupational and pay structures, including the existence of significant numbers of unpaid family workers in some countries, the same employment rate could mean different things in different countries.

There are a number of other problems. For example, because it shows a cross-section of the population at one point in time, it may disguise differences in lifetime patterns of employment related to child-rearing[2]; the range of hours worked by part-timers and full-timers also varies between countries; and, as a sample survey rather than a Census, the LFS is subject to all the dangers of sample surveys, although some of these are reduced when figures for a run of years are available.[3]

The LFS is, however, much more frequent than most national Censuses, and even the latest ones, whose results will soon become available, will not all provide information about lone parent families according to the type of definition used here.

In summary, the Labour Force Survey is the best potential source of information about the number and labour force activities of lone parent families. However, as its name implies, it is designed primarily for collecting and

2 Joshi H. and Davies H., Child Care and Mothers' Lifetime Earnings: Some European Comparisons, Centre for Economic Policy Research, Discussion Paper No 600, London, 1992.

3 See, Labour Force Survey: methods and definitions, 1988, Eurostat Theme 3 Series E, for more details.

analyzing the labour force rather than families, or even households. A number of modifications, both to the survey itself and to its analysis, would be needed in order to achieve true comparability.

There is also a general case for more family and household analyses of the LFS. It is now widely recognised that in many countries women form a large and increasing proportion of the labour force. However, the patterns of their labour force participation are very different from men's largely because their family and household situation is an important influence on their economic activities.

The 1989 report recommended that attempts should be made to extend LFS in order to provide comparable information about family developments, such as the number of lone parent families and their economic activity. This report repeats that recommendation.

Economic situation

Sources of income

Numerous reports have concluded that lone parent families run a greater risk of poverty than families headed by a couple.[4] The risk is not the same in all countries, nor for all types of lone parent, and different definitions of poverty have been used. But the living standards of lone parents and their sources of income have been a cause for concern.

Unfortunately, there is even less comparable information about the income, than about the numbers, of lone parents, although this is beginning to change (see below). Information provided in the last report described three main sources of income for lone parents: maintenance (including child support), state benefits and employment.

In none of the countries that were able to supply relevant information was maintenance a major source for most lone parents – not even for most divorced ones. But the balance between earnings and benefits varied greatly and this variation was quite complicated. For example, benefits could be minimal, a crucial supplement to earnings, an alternative to them, or play each of these roles for different categories of lone parents.

The benefit system within many countries is itself quite complicated and an overview of benefits relevant to lone parents is provided in the country reports in Part Two. Where public authorities are involved in the payment of maintenance this is also mentioned.

Here, economic activity rates as shown by the LFS are summarised but attention should be paid to some of the caveats about the LFS mentioned above (see also Tables 8-11).

Lone mothers are most likely to be economically active in Denmark and France (84% and 85% respectively) and least likely to be economically active in Ireland (37%). The LFS also shows that in all countries except the UK and Denmark the economic activity rate of lone mothers is higher than that of all mothers.

However, when the unemployment figures (shown in brackets in Table 8) are taken into account, the difference between lone mothers and all mothers is reversed in some countries. In Belgium, Ireland and the Netherlands, as well as Denmark and the UK, mothers in general are more likely to be employed (as distinct from simply seeking a job) than lone mothers.

Indeed, lone mothers are not only more likely to be unemployed than mothers in general but also than men. Lone fathers also have lower activity rates than men aged 25 to 49 in general but they are more likely to be economically active than lone mothers (see Tables 8 and 11). However, a country's unemployment is partly cyclical, so that the country differences do not just represent differences in employment patterns between different family types.

Tables 9 and 10 show the proportions employed full-time and part-time in two different ways. Table 9 shows the percentage of all those in each group (e.g.18% of all lone mothers in the UK work full-time and 21% part-time) and Table 10 shows the percentage of those employed in each group (e.g.the full-time/part-time divide for lone mothers in the UK is 46/54).

As far as mothers in general are concerned, the Tables show that their labour force participation patterns are extremely varied. But even so, in all countries except one (Portugal), less than half of all mothers have a full-time job. Even in Denmark, where 87% of all mothers are economically active, only 48% have a full-time job (although, of those who are employed, over half are full-time).

In the Netherlands only 5% of all mothers are employed full-time. This is far less than in any other country. The proportion working part-time (32%), on the other hand, is one of the

4 See, for example, the 1989 report on lone parent families V/545/89.

Table 8 Lone parents in the EC Labour Force Survey 1989

	Economic activity (employment and unemployment) of parents with children under age 18:					
	All mothers		Lone mothers		Lone fathers	
	%		%		%	
Belgium	62	(53+9)	68	(50+19)	86	(75+*)
Denmark	87	(80+8)	84	(74+11)	*	(89+*)
Germany	49	(44+5)	69	(59+11)	89	(82+7)
Greece	49	(44+5)	65	(57+8)	*	(*)
Spain	36	(28+8)	60	(48+12)	78	(*)
France	67	(59+9)	85	(68+16)	91	(84+8)
Ireland	31	(24+7)	37	(24+13)	*	(*)
Italy	48	(41+6)	67	(59+9)	91	(87+4)
Luxembourg	39	(38+*)	*	(62+*)	*	(*)
Netherlands	45	(38+7)	48	(32+16)	85	(75+10)
Portugal	65	(61+4)	71	(66+5)	85	(*)
UK	63	(57+6)	50	(40+10)	76	(65+11)
Eur 12	**54**	**(48+7)**	**66**	**(54+12)**	**86**	**(79+7)**

Source Eurostat Labour Force Survey 1989. Special Analysis carried out by the EC Statistical Office

Notes
- See Table 1
- The unemployed are defined as those without work and actively seeking work.
- There may be small discrepancies in the totals due to rounding.
- A star * in this table may indicate that it was one of the components of the total which was too small to be reliable and not necessarily the total itself.

Table 9 Lone parents in the EC Labour Force Survey 1989

	Parents with children under age 18: % of each parent type employed full-time and part-time					
	Full-time			Part-time		
	All mothers	Lone mothers	Lone fathers	All mothers	Lone mothers	Lone fathers
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Belgium	37	38	75	16	11	-
Denmark	48	54	89	32	20	-
Germany	20	35	77	24	23	5
Greece	40	54	80	4	-	-
Spain	24	41	70	4	7	-
France	43	57	80	16	11	2
Ireland	17	18	55	8	7	-
Italy	36	54	86	5	5	-
Luxembourg	27	62	-	11	-	-
Netherlands	5	8	64	32	24	11
Portugal	55	59	79	5	6	-
UK	20	18	60	37	21	4
Eur 12	**29**	**40**	**75**	**18**	**16**	**4**

Source Eurostat Labour Force Survey 1989. Special Analysis carried out by the EC Statistical Office

Notes
- See Tables 1 and 8
- Full-time and part-time work was defined by respondents. The range of hours worked in each category varies substantially from one country to another.

highest and the full-time/part-time divide is 14/86. But the economic activity rate of all mothers in the Netherlands is 45%, which is below the EC average.

Yet another contrast is provided by Greece, Spain, Italy and Portugal, where less than 5% of all mothers have part-time jobs and the full-time part-time divide is at least 80/20. In the first three of these countries this goes with a low mothers' economic activity rate but, in Portugal, mothers' economic activity rate is well above average (65%).

As far as lone mothers are concerned, except in Germany, the full-time/part-time divide reflects that of all mothers in each country, although lone mothers are slightly more likely to be employed full-time. In only the UK and the Netherlands are both mothers in general and lone mothers in particular more likely to be employed part-time than full-time.

Poverty

But what effect do the variations in employment rates have on lone parents' living standards? The

Table 10 Lone parents in the EC Labour Force Survey 1989

	Full-time/part-time divide % of those employed	
	All mothers	**Lone mothers**
	%	%
Belgium	70/30	78/22
Denmark	60/40	73/27
Germany	45/55	60/40
Greece	91/9	-
Spain	86/14	85/15
France	73/27	84/16
Ireland	68/32	72/28
Italy	88/12	92/18
Luxembourg	71/29	-
Netherlands	14/86	25/75
Portugal	92/8	91/9
UK	35/65	46/54
Eur 12	**62/38**	**71/29**

Source Eurostat Labour Force Survey 1989: Special Analysis carried out by the EC Statistical Office

Notes See Table 1, 8 and 9.

Table 11 Men in the EC Labour Force Survey 1989

	Economic activity (employment and unemployment) of Men in different age groups					
	25–49		**50–64**		**Total age 14+**	
	%		%		%	
Belgium	95	(90+5)	52	(50+2)	61	(57+4)
Denmark	95	(88+7)	77	(72+5)	74	(68+6)
Germany	94	(90+4)	72	(68+4)	70	(67+3)
Greece	96	(93+3)	70	(69+1)	66	(63+3)
Spain	95	(85+10)	71	(64+7)	64	(56+8)
France	97	(91+6)	58	(54+4)	65	(61+4)
Ireland	95	(80+15)	75	(66+9)	69	(58+11)
Italy	95	(91+4)	63	(62+1)	65	(60+5)
Lux.rg	96	(95+1)	56	(55+1)	68	(67+1)
Neth.ds	95	(90+5)	60	(57+3)	69	(65+4)
Portugal	96	(93+3)	72	(71+1)	71	(68+3)
UK	96	(90+6)	76	(70+6)	73	(68+5)
Eur 12	**95**	**(90+5)**	**67**	**(64+3)**	**68**	**(63+5)**

Source Labour Force Survey: Results 1989, Eurostat Series 3C, (Table 04), Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 1991.

Notes – See Table 8.
– In this table the % unemployed has simply been calculated by deducting the % employed from the % economically active (so, unlike Table 8, there are no discrepancies due to rounding).

degree to which labour force participation provides a guarantee against poverty for lone parents varies from country to country, according to a new study of six EC, and several other, countries[5]. But the study does suggest that, as the extent of labour force participation increases, the risk of 'poverty' decreases.

The study also suggests that the percentage of lone mothers in poverty (defined as 50% of median net income including benefits and adjusted for family size) was on average twice that of lone fathers. In turn, the percentage of lone parents in poverty was about twice that of families headed by a couple. But there were differences between countries. The rates for lone parents in poverty were as follows:

Lone parents in poverty,[a] 1984-5

F.R. Germany	25%
France	17%
Italy	14%
Luxembourg	12%
UK	10%
Netherlands	8%

Notes a) Poverty = 50% of median net equivalent income in each country
b) These figures compare with 51% in the USA and 2% in Sweden.

Source Bradshaw J. and Mitchell D. Lone Parents and their Incomes: A Comparative Study of Ten Countries, Table 2.7, University of York, November 1991

However, other studies have produced different results and this is only one of several emerging from the Luxembourg Income Project, which is an international academic effort to assemble national income and expenditure surveys[6].

Eurostat has also started to publish figures from national household budget surveys, which do not always use the 'standard' definition of a lone parent used in this report, but which are also increasingly likely to provide useful information about the income and expenditure of different types of household.

The 1982 EC Report on One Parent Families (see Friis Report referred to in **Numbers** above) was undertaken partly because of concern that lone parents, as a group, ran a relatively high risk of poverty. However, truly comparative studies of poverty are still notoriously difficult to achieve. The different definitions of 'poverty' and the different methods of measuring income, adjusting income for family size, etc have produced dramatically different results.

A recent German survey, for example, found that 45% of lone parents in the West had income below 50% of average (mean) household income (adjusted for size) compared with 11% of couples with children under 18[7]. The 'Europass' study of seven EC countries, using several different definitions of 'poverty' found the following:

Households with 1 adult and 1 dependent child in poverty, 1985-88

	Measures of poverty		
	CSP	SPL	EC
	%	%	%
Belgium	52	54	6
Netherlands	3	34	8
Luxembourg	47	47	7
France(Lorraine)	38	52	13
Ireland	46	68	20
Spain(Catalonia)	43	52	10
Greece	45	44	7

Notes In summary, the CSP and SPL measures are 'subjective' ones. The EC standard is 'below 50% of average equivalent disposable income'. Details of definitions and methods are available in the source of this table.

Source Deleeck H. et al., Indicators of Poverty and Adequacy of Social Security p138-9, Centre for Social Policy, University of Antwerp, September 1991.

Other international bodies also provide information about the economic situation (not necessarily poverty) of lone parents in some EC Member States. For example, the OECD and the Council of Europe have published specific studies about lone parent families[8].

Several other EC bodies provide regular information which is relevant: in particular, the 'Observatories', such as the Family Policy and the Social Exclusion Observatories, and the EC Childcare Network, as well as the official Mutual Information System on Social Protection (MISSOC).

5 Bradshaw J. and Mitchell D., Lone Parents and their Incomes: A Comparative Study of Ten Countries, University of York.

6 Another one based on earlier data is reported in a chapter by Hauser R. and Fischer L., Economic Well-being among One-Parent Families, in Ed. Smeeding T. et al. Inequality and Income Distribution in Comparative Perspective, Harvester Wheatsheaf 1990.

7 Hauser R. et al. Incomes in East and West Germany on the Eve of Union, Discussion Paper No 34, German Institute for Economic Research, Berlin.

8 OECD, Lone Parent Families: The Economic Challenge, Social Policy Studies No 8, Paris; the Council of Europe Steering Committee on Social Policy Project 111-4 produced several reports in 1991.

2 Country sketches

The country sketches aim to provide an overview and to highlight new developments. They are based on information and comments provided by the national experts which have been adjusted in the light of the overall information available. The sketches do not duplicate the far more detailed information about national policies provided by the various EC Observatories and Networks (referred to at the end of Part One).

Belgium

Bea Cantillon, Centre for Social Policy, University of Antwerp

There are few statistics about lone parent families in Belgium. The main source is the Census and the analysis of that uses a definition which includes all unmarried children of any age. Not only does this vastly overestimate the number, the characteristics of such lone parents are also very different from those of the 'standard' lone parents who are the object of this report. About one quarter of those in the 1981 Belgian Census were over 65 years old, for example.

The Centre for Social Policy (CSP) at the University of Antwerp conducts a survey which provides information about household living standards and poverty. It shows that between 1985 and 1988 the number of lone parent families as a proportion of families with children under age 18 increased from about 8% to about 9%. (However, these figures are not strictly comparable with the estimate quoted for the mid-1980s in the table in the **Numbers** section above- see Table 4 and 5.)

Sources of income for lone parent households (as distinct from families) changed little between 1985 and 1988. Compared with two parent families, lone parents continued to receive a far higher proportion of income from benefits – about two fifths, compared with one fifth, and less than 10% from maintenance.

On average the incomes of lone parent families are considerably lower than those of two parent families, even when adjusted for family size. This is due to lone parents' lower rates of employment, lower income from employment, greater reliance on inadequate benefits, low levels of maintenance awarded and frequent failure to pay. The family allowances are also biased towards larger families while lone parents tend to have smaller families than couples.

Lone parent families are far more likely to be living in 'poverty' than couples with children. They are also less likely to own their own home (one third compared with two thirds in 1985). In 1988, 36% had incomes below the poverty line devised by the CSP (see Part One, **Economic Situation**), compared with 15% of couples with one or two children; and between 1985 and 1988 the position of lone parents continued to deteriorate while the situation of couples with children improved.

Details of the employment of lone parents are shown in Part One. The proportion of lone mothers in Belgium who are unemployed is higher than in any other country, although the unemployment rate among lone mothers who are economically active is higher in Ireland and the Netherlands. About two thirds are economically active and half are actually employed.

However, neither lone parents nor couple parents are homogenous groups. For example, male lone parents tend to be better off than female ones. Among lone mothers, the better educated who continue in the labour force after childbirth, are relatively well off. So are widows, partly because they are better protected by social insurance and survivors' pensions. Among couples, the single earners also have a high risk of poverty and there are more housewives in this group than there are lone parents.

Although there are no special benefits for lone parents, they do figure in policy debates

and the benefit system does provide a right to a means-tested subsistence minimum, known as the 'Minimex'. In 1988 a new category, 'singles with children', was created within the Minimex and the intention is that the rate for this group should gradually rise to that of couples with children. (This is in fact happening although there is still a gap between the two rates.)

All beneficiaries of the Minimex have to register for employment. They can take a job while receiving benefit and a certain amount of income is disregarded before it reduces the level of benefit by 100%. The limits are highest for those who have been receiving for the shortest periods of time.

In the past few years there have been two major policy changes directed at lone parents. In September 1989 a system of 'advance child support' was introduced. This is administered by the local authority responsible for the Minimex, although it is a separate scheme.

Because recipients of the Minimex must first have claimed all the rights that they entitled to under Belgian law, lone parents are in effect required to used the advance child support scheme and to reveal information about the 'other' parent if they want to claim the Minimex. But there is no other provision for recovering the Minimex from the 'other' parent unless they are still married and no maintenance has been awarded.

Others can claim the 'advance child support' if maintenance has not been paid for a specified amount of time and the lone parent's income is below a specified amount. This income threshold was originally set relatively low (although higher than the Minimex). It was increased in January 1991, which resulted in 30% increase in take-up.

The 'advance' is in effect a loan made to the lone parent. The authorities then recover the loan from the other parent, although he (she) is exempt if his (her) income falls below a certain level (roughly equivalent to the Minimex for a single person). However, if the lone parent is in receipt of the Minimex the income from the advance is taken into account and therefore does not increase her(his) level of income.

The other major change was the introduction of a tax allowance for child care costs in January 1989 (not specifically for lone parents). It only applies to child care in certain recognised institutions. Otherwise, families simply get a tax deduction of a set amount for each child under age three.

As far as tax allowances in general are concerned, lone parents are at a disadvantage compared with one-earner couples with the same income because the latter can split their income and thereby reduce their tax bill. On the other hand, lone parents get a tax advantage because they are entitled to an extra allowance in addition to the standard one for households with children.

Overall, the benefit system is biased towards larger families and gives preferential treatment to those who have a connection with the labour market. For mothers out of the labour force, entitlement to the higher level benefits, such as survivors' pensions, non means-tested family allowances etc., and to health care, depends on the employment status of the partner, which puts lone parents at a disadvantage unless they are themselves in the labour market.

Denmark

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Denmark has a relatively plentiful supply of information about lone parent families, although the various sources do not all use consistent definitions. The best one for the purpose of this report is the Omnibus Survey which is carried out three times a year and uses the 'standard' definition.

During the second half of the 1980s, the increase in the proportion of lone parents was very slight – from 14.0% in 1985/6 to 14.8% in 1990/91. This is consistent with some other demographic trends, which have now stabilised or even reversed. Marriage rates, birth rates and births outside marriage all fall into this category and women's participation in the labour market is now almost as high as men's, although many more of them work part-time.

The births outside marriage trends are, in any case, misleading. For example, since 1974 the proportion of children under one year old not living with a couple has remained static at around 4-6%, although births outside marriage increased from 11% in 1970 to 45% at the end of the 1980s.

Various explanations have been advanced for this new found stability, although some of these may require explanation in themselves. They include 'neo-conservative' attitudes, 'satisfied demand' (meaning, now that external

barriers to divorce have been removed, there is no more suppressed demand), and 'structural' factors such as the availability of housing.

In the latest set of figures, never-married lone parents appear to form about 28% of the total. But figures presented last time showed that well over half of them were in fact separated after a period of 'cohabitation', so that nearly 8 in 10 lone parents could be classified as divorced or separated. Just over one in ten belonged to the 'true' never-married group and less than one in ten were widowed.

The last set of figures showed that there were virtually no lone parents under the age of 20. This time there are no figures for this age group but only 8% were under age 25. There has been an increase in the proportion under age 30 but otherwise little change over the five years.

Lone parents are still far more likely than couples to have only one child: 67% of lone parents compared with 54% of couples. Only 6% of lone parent families had three or more children compared with 12% of couple families. As a result of the rise in the birth rate, there are generally more young children but there is still a difference: 36% of lone parents had a child aged 0-5 compared with 46% of couples with children.

A high proportion of lone mothers are unemployed, and therefore, although their labour force participation rate is slightly higher than that of all mothers (91% compared with 86%), the balance is reversed as far as employment itself is concerned (64% compared with 82%). The LFS has not been quoted here as half of its so-called lone mothers are cohabiting but it shows, as would be expected, a watered-down version of the same pattern.

The most noticeable employment trend has been the increase in full-time employment, both among lone and other mothers. About two thirds of those who are employed are full-time (slightly more for lone mothers and slightly less for mothers in couples). This trend appears to be age-related, in that, the younger the mother, the more likely she is to have a full-time job, regardless of the age of the children.

However, in spite of their high employment rate by EC standards, lone parents on average relied on a wider variety of income sources than couple parents. In 1985-6 about 32% of lone parents' disposable income came from benefits, compared with 5% in the case of couple families and 61% came from employment,compared with 87%.

Lone parent families have on average a substantially higher income than one-earner couple families (if their income is divided by the number of people in the family). The level is much closer to, although still lower than, that of couple families with two incomes (the ratios in 1985-6 being 24:16:27).

In terms of home ownership, however, there is a large difference between the two types of family. Only one in three lone parents own their own home, compared with four out of five couple parents (in 1985-60).

The idea that policies should aim to equalise the situation of different types of family is widely accepted. The concept of illegitimacy has gone and, because they can provide for them financially, mothers are able to divorce without being irresponsible towards their children.

The main thrust of policy towards lone parents is to encourage their employment. The basic (universal) and lone parent family allowances are not means-tested and more generous than in many other countries but are only meant to provide supplementary help. Apart from these, and the child support scheme, there is no special benefit or tax allowance for lone parent families (and no tax allowances for families with children in general). The health system is free and therefore not related to employment or benefit status.

However, for lone parent families (and others) receiving social assistance, there is the option of a higher level 'rehabilitation' (education) benefit which is paid for a maximum of five years and, unlike social assistance itself, since 1990 it has not been means-tested. It is estimated that over a fifth of lone parents who claim social assistance receive this benefit and that about a quarter of all lone parents receive social assistance.

A substantial group of those receiving social assistance (about four out of ten) are dependent on it for long periods of time (over five years). Most of these are unemployed with little vocational training. A special study in the mid 1980s showed that many of these felt stigmatised because of their dependence on benefit – not because of their lone parent status – and despaired of improving their situation[9].

Although long-term recipients are allowed a certain amount of disregarded income before

9 Thaulow I. and Gaust B., Socialforsknings Instituttet Publication 175, 1987.

benefit is reduced at a rate of 100%, the combined effect of the means-test for child care and the rate at which housing benefit is withdrawn as income rises, results in a steeper effective taxation rate ('poverty trap') for lone parents.

There is an advance child support scheme available as of right to all lone parents which ensures that they receive at least a standard minimum (known as the 'normal contribution') for each child in addition to the other family allowances. The scheme is administered by the local authorities who take on the responsibility for recovering the money from the other parent, who may be exempt if his(her) income is very low.

The same level of child support is paid to widows (for whom there are no special benefits) and to unmarried mothers where paternity cannot be proved. Because all births have to be registered by two parents there is generally no problem in establishing who is the liable relative. Unmarried mothers have to report the birth within a month and in most cases the father agrees or, if not, may be taken to Court. If the mother refuses to name the father, she can be fined but in practice this rarely happens and the local authority takes over the basic child support obligation. In practice, therefore, virtually all lone parents receive the 'normal contribution' or its equivalent.

In summary, most lone parents are able to provide for themselves and their children. But they are expected to, which can intensify the problems of those who are unable to do so. As a result of the high level of employment – and full-time employment – of parents, the improvement of conditions for combining family life and paid work has become a government objective. Lack of time is seen as a problem for families with children in general but it is even more of a problem for lone parent families.

Germany

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There is no single source of information about, or definition of, lone parent families in Germany but most of the up-to-date information is drawn from the annual Mikrozensus. It shows that the proportion of lone parent families remained more or less static over the period 1986 (covered in the last report) to 1989 at between 12 and 13% of all families with children under 18.

Most of the statistical information still relates to the old GDR (West). However, available information suggests that in the old DDR (East) one in three children is born into a lone parent family compared with one in ten in the FRG. Lone parent families in the old DDR tend to be younger, more highly educated, more likely to be divorced or never-married. Very few of them are widowed or married-but-separated.

The gap between the average income (adjusted for family size) of couples with children under 18 and lone parent families is slightly, but not significantly, larger in the West. But the gap between the income of all households with children and the average is a good deal larger in the West than in the East.[10]

Although there has been little change in the total number since the last report, the 1989 figures confirm the rise in the proportion of the never-married group, from 14% in 1980 to 20% in 1986, to 24% in 1989. However, this has not resulted in a particularly young collection of lone parents as only 8% were under age 25 in 1989. As in 1986, around six out of ten lone parents are divorced or separated.

The number of children has not changed much. Lone parents are still much more likely than couples to have only one child, 73% compared with 50%, and less likely to have three or more, 6% compared with 12%. They are also less likely to have a child under age five, only 17% compared with 31% (these figures cover any child under age five).

There are no new figures on sources of income but the LFS shows that the lone mothers are much more likely to be employed than couple mothers (over half compared with under half). According to a special analysis in 1985 earnings were the predominant source of income for 54% of lone parents, social assistance for 11%, unemployment benefit 6%, pensions 12% and maintenance 15%[11].

However, these sources differed substantially according to the marital status of the lone parent. For example, for 60% of widow/ers, pensions (such as widows pensions) were the main source, for 36% it was earnings, and none of them relied primarily on social

10 Hauser R. et al. Income in East and West Germany on the Eve of Union. Discussion Paper 54, German Institute for Economic Research, Berlin, August 1991.

11 Erica Neubauer, Alleinerziehende Mutter und Vater, Stuttgart 1988.

assistance. However, earnings were the main source for 63% of divorced lone parents and social assistance for 14% of them.

In the period up to 1985 there was a rise in the proportion of lone parent families dependent on the subsistence income provided by social assistance. In 1985 about a quarter of lone parent families had been reliant on it at some point during the year. Exact figures for 1989 are not yet available but the proportion of lone parents dependent on social assistance is not thought to have changed a great deal since.

For tax purposes, couples tend to be at an advantage because they are allowed to split their income and thereby reduce their tax bill, particularly if there is only one earner. On the other hand, lone parents are entitled to a special 'householder' tax allowance and to a much smaller child care tax allowance which is not generally available to couples. Both couples and lone parents are entitled to the same basic child tax allowance.

There is a system of 'advance child support' to which a lone parent can have recourse if the liable parent is unable or unwilling to pay. Central government advances the money and then recovers it from the liable parent, according to the level of his income. The scheme only covers children under age six and the advance can continue for up to three years. The rate paid for a first child is effectively lower because family allowance is set against it.

The family allowance itself is universal, although the rates are biased towards larger families and there is also a means-tested addition. There are various other benefits, of which the most notable is probably the child-rearing benefit which is paid to a parent out of employment (or employed for less than 19 hours a week) for 18 months after childbirth. It is the only income that is not deducted from social assistance.

The rest of the benefit system can be roughly summarised as made up of two elements, social insurance, which also covers health, and social assistance, which is generally paid at a lower rate than social insurance. Married women who are out of the labour force are covered by their husband's insurance and are therefore better protected than are lone parents who are out of the labour force. Similarly, widows benefit from survivors benefits provided by the social insurance scheme.

The social assistance scheme is a national one but there is also some regional discretion. It pays a basic subsistence income and also makes special payments for extra costs. It may also, in certain circumstances, continue to pay, for a short period, the health insurance contributions of a recipient but if the recipient is not insured against health costs, these are covered by social assistance.

All recipients have an obligation to seek work and lone parents are only likely to be exempt if they have a child under age three or more than three children. Any extra income, including maintenance, is deducted at a rate of 100%, although a small amount of earned income may be exempted.

The legal obligations of family cover parents, grandparents (children and grandchildren) and not only ex-spouses and natural fathers. If these are not fulfilled, social assistance is paid in full to the lone parent and then recovered from the liable members of the family. But family members living in other households are only obliged to pay if their income exceeds certain limits, which are considerably above the social assistance line.

Several analyses reported last time showed that lone parents tend on average to have lower income (adjusted for family size) than couple parents and are more vulnerable to poverty. However, there were large variations in the income of lone parents and the distribution was more unequal than that of couples with children. Lone parents were also far less likely to own their own homes: 22% compared with 53% of couples with children (Neubauer quoted above).

In the Summer of 1990 the Constitutional Court declared that the tax allowance for children was too low on the grounds that only earned income above the social assistance line may be taxed. Much of the discussion that has followed has concentrated on the improvement of tax allowances rather than on family allowances, which the government was equally free to raise. However, tax allowances do not benefit lone parents who are out of employment, and tend to benefit the better-off among those who are employed.

In summary, the general aim of policy is to support the costs of children and, to some degree, level out inequalities. However, the various programmes are inconsistent. For example, there are a number of means-tested benefits directed at the poorest groups but the tax system tends to benefit high income, one earner couples.

Greece

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National statistical sources provide very little comprehensive information about lone parent families. The Labour Force Survey shows that in 1989 lone parents made up 5% of families with children under age 18. This was the lowest proportion of any European country, although Spain and Italy were close, with 6% and 7% respectively.

According to Eurostat's demographic statistics (See Tables 6 and 7) the rate of births outside marriage, although up compared with 1960, was the lowest of any European country. Latest figures showing the divorce rate relate to 1980, when it was extremely low compared with most other EC countries, although the rates in Spain and Italy were even lower.

The Labour Force Survey shows that 49% of all mothers with a child under 18 were economically active compared with 65% of lone mothers. The vast majority were working full-time whereas, among all mothers, the full-time/part-time divide was closer to half and half.

Among the Greek benefits for families with children, there are some allowances specifically for families with children, including a monthly means-tested allowance paid by the Ministry of Social Welfare. Lone parents are also entitled to specific tax allowances which are paid at different rates for unmarried and widowed/divorced lone parents.

A range of other institutions also provide help of various kinds. For example, there is a special organisation for unmarried mothers called the 'Mother Centre' which provides them with shelter during pregnancy and after childbirth, as well as advice and financial assistance, if necessary. They may also receive assistance from the Patriotic Institution for Social Provision which provides help for families in difficulty. The General Secretary of Equality also has responsibility for lone parent families.

In recent years, there has been a major change in attitudes towards lone parent families who are now much less stigmatised than they used to be. But lone parents still face many problems. For example, they get no health or medical assistance if they are out of the labour force. Policies in general are confused and inadequate.

Spain

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There is little information about lone parent families in Spain. The 1989 Labour Force Survey shows that 6% of families with children were lone parent families.

The Labour Force Survey also shows that lone mothers are far more likely to be economically active and to work full-time than mothers in couples - in fact hardly any lone mothers work part-time.

There are no specific national policies for lone parent families. However, they can benefit from subsidies and other provisions for low income families, for example, in relation to school and child care facilities. Most regional administrations have a system of public nurseries (where demand usually exceeds supply) and lone parents have priority for places for their children.

The health insurance system became universal in 1987. Before that only those lone parents who had been in employment had access to it.

New policies have recently been introduced which could benefit lone parent families although not specifically directed at them. One example are the regional schemes of social assistance (there being no national scheme). Seventeen regional authorities (as at January 1992) have introduced schemes similar to the French RMI (see below) which may benefit lone parent families.

In the Madrid region, for example, a scheme was introduced in 1990. During the first year, 8,000 families benefited and half of these were lone parent families headed by a woman.

In conclusion, low income is one of the main problems for lone parent families, particularly those headed by a woman, and the major demands of organisations representing them, such as the Federation of Widows and the Association of Separated and Divorced Women, concern training programmes for women, adequate jobs, child care facilities and fiscal benefits.

France

Nadine Lefaucheur, CNRS

The most up-to-date statistical source is the Labour Force Survey. In contrast with many other countries, it is used nationally as a source of information about lone parents. But its main disadvantage is that it does not identify lone parents 'hidden' in the households of others.

Various different definitions of a lone parent family are used for different purposes. The age of 25 is generally used as the cut-off point for defining families with children. However, the age of 18 is frequently used as well.

On the children-under-25 definition, there was no change between 1987 and 1989 in the proportion of families with children who were lone parent families. But the composition of the group changed, with a fall in the proportion of widows and a rise among the other groups. Using age 18 as the cut-off point for children lowers the total from 12-13% to 11%.

Of lone mothers with children under age 18 in 1989, 60% were divorced or separated, 14% were widows and 26% were 'never-married'. Women in this 'never-married' group were not particularly young as there were very few lone parents under age 20 and only 5% under age 25.

The economic activity rate of lone mothers is extremely high (85%) by most countries' standards, although the percentage unemployed is also very high (16%) and the vast majority of those who are employed work full-time (also 85%). The comparative figures for mothers in general are: 67% economically active, 9% unemployed and 73% of those employed working full-time (see Tables 8–11).

Although there are numerous different kinds of family allowance, they are heavily biased in favour of families with three or more children, or with a child under age three, both of which apply to a minority of lone parents. Indeed, the basic family allowance is not paid at all for the first child and a majority of lone parents only have one child, who is likely to be over age three.

Maintenance also appears to contribute little. According to a survey of divorced women by INED (the national demographic institute) in 1985-6, maintenance contributed on average 11% of the income of divorced mothers.

Apart from survivors' benefits under the social insurance scheme, there are two special benefits for lone parent families. One, known as API, is a means-tested benefit which guarantees qualifying lone parents a basic income. It is payable to pregnant solo women, lone parents with a child under age three and, for one year only unless they have a child under age three, to those who have just become lone parents.

In practice about 13% of lone mothers (about 10% of all lone parents) receive the API and about 6 in 10 of these fall into the never-married category. Lone parents who have exhausted their entitlement may qualify for the RMI (a means-tested benefit introduced in 1989 – not specifically for lone parents) which guarantees a subsistence income but at a substantially lower level than that guaranteed by the API.

All those whose initial income is below the RMI are entitled to it without condition. Recipients are supposed to be offered a 'contrat d'insertion', e.g. to have a medical examination, to learn to read, to attend a training course, but this is not a condition for receipt of benefit.

There are no rules about recovering the API or RMI paid to a lone parent (other than through the ASF – see below), although lone parents are usually asked to apply for maintenance from the other partner. However, this maintenance is counted in full as income and therefore does not increase the total income received by lone parents claiming either of these benefits.

The second benefit specifically for lone parent families is the ASF. It is paid at a rate worth about 10% of the minimum wage for each child where one of three conditions applies: where one parent is dead; has not 'recognised' the child; has 'recognised' the child but has not paid maintenance for him/her for at least two months.

In this last case it is, in effect, an advance child support scheme and is paid as a loan recoverable from the ex-husband or the 'natural' father if he has 'recognised' the child (or if, within two years of the birth, the mother had successfully taken proceedings to establish paternity). In all cases, like the other family allowances, it mainly benefits lone parents in employment as it is counted as income for the purpose of API and RMI.

The health insurance system is based on employment but API and RMI recipients are automatically credited in and, where relevant, lone parents can continue to benefit from their ex-husband's insurance for one year after death or separation or until the youngest is aged three.

Children in lone mother families may continue to benefit from their father's insurance until they reach the age of majority.

For tax purposes, income is divided by the number of family members. In couples each parent counts as one, the first two children as a half and the third etc. child as one. In general, this tends to benefit large families and one earner couples. However, there is some provision for lone parents. Widows count as two people and the first child of any lone parent counts as one instead of a half.

The available evidence about incomes suggests that, although four out of five lone parents cope financially by taking a job (and are therefore likely to be entitled to job-related benefits, such as the contributory ones), about a fifth have difficulty in doing so and these are the ones most likely to be heavily dependent on state benefits. As far as home ownership is concerned, 42% of lone parents owned their own home compared with 62% of couple parents.[12]

Various training programmes are relevant to this group, for example, when registered as job-seekers, lone mothers have priority for attending vocational programmes; API recipients can take part in a broader scheme to make women more 'employable' run by the Department of Women's Rights and there is also a scheme for women over age 40 with very low incomes.

In summary, because of their pro-natalist roots, the family allowances, for which France is famous, are structured in such a way that they are less likely to help lone parents than couples with children.

The rhetoric of French family policy allows mothers the choice whether to be employed or not, but in practice most mothers do have a paid job, particularly when their youngest child is over age three. As for lone mothers, they are in effect expected to take a paid job, at the latest, once their youngest child is over age three, and it is usually assumed that they should not otherwise need more than one year to adjust to being a lone parent.

12 Mormiche P. and Bonnaud C., L'Ameublement de Menages en 1988.

Ireland

Valerie Richardson, University College, Dublin

There are three main sources of information about lone parent families in Ireland: the Census, the Labour Force Survey and the Statistics of the Department of Social Welfare, each of which uses a different definition, none of which are quite the same as the 'standard' one.

Figures from the 1986 Census show a rise of about 1.5% compared with the 1981 Census. This is thought to be largely due to the increase in births outside marriage which rose from 5% in 1980 to 10% in 1985/6 and have increased since – to 12% in 1989. However, the LFS uses a definition closer to the 'standard' and according to this source, in 1989 about 9% of families with children under 18 were lone parent families.

Ireland is the only EC country which completely bans divorce so that divorce cannot be a route into lone parenthood. However, this does not stop informal separations and, as remarriage is also banned, that route out of lone parenthood is equally prohibited. In 1989 the law was changed to allow 'no-fault' judicial separation. This terminates the parties obligation to live together but still does not allow remarriage.

Irish lone mothers have the lowest labour force participation rate of any EC country and, in addition, a high proportion of those who are economically active are unemployed, so that just under a quarter of them actually have a paid job. They are therefore highly dependent on state benefits or on their families and are likely to be poor by Irish standards.

For example, recent research at the National Maternity Hospital found that over half of the unmarried mothers who gave birth there returned to live with their own parents[13] and research on poverty in Ireland shows that families with children in general have a high risk of poverty but that the risk is particularly high for lone parent families.[14] There is also some evidence that lone parents who do live on their own tend to live in low quality housing ghettos.[15]

For those who do have a job, there is an extra tax allowance which is equivalent to that

13 Donoghoe J. et al., Unmarried Mothers Delivered in the National Maternity Hospital, NMH/I.C.D. Dublin 1989.

14 B. Nolan and B. Farrell, Child Poverty in Ireland, Combat Poverty Agency, Dublin 1990.

15 Daly M., Women in Poverty, Attic Press 1989.

available for a spouse. However, one earner married couples have the advantage that they can split their income and thereby reduce their tax bill.

In 1990 the benefit system for lone parent families was overhauled. The means-tested Lone Parents' Allowance was introduced to provide a living income for lone parents, to rationalise, and to fill gaps arising from, the variety of means-tested payments previously available for lone mothers.

The new benefit, which is paid at a higher rate than social assistance for the unemployed, is available to lone fathers but so far only one has claimed it. If a child spends any part of the week with both parents, then each can claim the Lone Parents' Allowance.

However, not all of the changes necessarily benefit the lone parent. In 1990 a 'liable relative' scheme, set up by the Social Welfare Act 1989, came into operation. This is designed so that the government can recover some of the benefits paid to the lone parent from the liable relative, taking account of his/her income and dependants.

The liable relative scheme does not affect unmarried parents. Similarly, maintenance paid to an unmarried mother by the father does not affect her claim for Lone Parents' Allowance. This is because the father's contribution is deemed to be maintenance for the child and the Lone Parent's Allowance is assessed according to the mother's income.

Some lone parents may be entitled to the much older Deserted Wives' Benefit which is based either on the claimant's own or the husband's contributions. This is payable on condition that the husband has 'deserted' for at least three months, that he left against the will of the claimant (or the claimant had to leave because of unreasonable behaviour), that the claimant does not receive adequate maintenance, has made reasonable efforts to obtain maintenance, does not cohabit, and, if there are no dependent children, she must be over age 40.

Apart from these specific benefits, lone parents, like other families, may be entitled to a range of other benefits, including the basic family allowances (which is a 'universal' benefit), and various means-tested schemes, such as Family Income Supplement, rent allowance and free school meals.

At the time of writing the Irish Government is about to publish a report on marital breakdown. The question of divorce may therefore come back onto the political agenda, although a Constitutional Referendum would be necessary before any changes could be made. Some newspapers have suggested that there may be one later in 1992.

More generally, increasing attention has been paid to the status of women and to issues such as child care which are likely to affect their employment, and, in 1990, the Second Commission on the Status of Women was set up with a remit which includes women working in the home. Measures to help women in general which may result from these initiatives may also help lone mothers.

Italy

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Data from surveys conducted by the official statistical office, ISTAT, in 1983 and 1988 show that the proportion of lone parent families over the five year period remained at around 6%. But there was a major change in the composition of the group (consistent with the data on births outside marriage), which suggests that the Italian situation is moving closer to that in some of the 'Northern' Member States.

In particular, the proportion of widows fell by eight percentage points to 35% and the proportion in the never-married group rose by seven percentage points to 17%. The former is still very high compared with countries such as Denmark, the UK, Germany and France, where the proportion of widows is less than half that of Italy but there has been a considerable change nevertheless and there has been a corresponding increase in the proportion under age 35.

The 1983 survey showed that three quarters of lone parents depended on work or on a widow's pension. Although this means that they are likely to have a secure source of income, very often this income is low, because many of the jobs which they hold are low paid and because the widow's pension is not adequate to maintain a mother and a child.

Between 1983 and 1988 there was a substantial rise in the economic activity, employment and unemployment rates of lone mothers. The employment rate, for example, rose 10 percentage points. The LFS figures for 1989 are slightly different but both sources show around 6 in 10 of lone mothers in

employment. The LFS also shows that this is much higher than the proportion of mothers in general (around 4 in 10) but that part-time jobs are extremely rare in either case.

There is a great deal of pressure on lone parents to take a job as other sources of income are inadequate. Although information about maintenance as a source of income is patchy, the 1983 survey, for example, showed that it was not a major source for at least three quarters of lone parents.

As there is no machinery for setting or enforcing maintenance payments other than individual Court action undertaken by the lone parent, this is unlikely to have changed. In any case the law only applies to married families. Ex-cohabitees and even children born out of wedlock have no rights against the natural father unless he has chosen to recognise them.

In general, there are no specific policies for lone parent families although they may receive preferential treatment under more general provisions, such as nursery and child care places, and some general provisions may be particularly useful to them. For example, in 1991 a new law was passed setting up training programmes for women and there are hopes that, once it comes into effect, it could help lone parents out of the low-paid, unskilled jobs which many of them hold.

Lone parents who are in a paid job are also likely to benefit from the way that the tax system favours one earner families (by doubling child tax allowances, for example, rather than splitting income as in some other countries). Similarly, although there is no national scheme of social assistance or universal family allowance, there is a means-tested family allowance for low income families (which does not provide a subsistence income) which treats lone parent families slightly more generously than a married parent.

Housing is a major issue for lone parents because there is a serious shortage in the major cities, with very high rents as a result. Subsidised housing is available according to national criteria which include income and the number of dependent children. But the Regions, which administer housing policy, do not usually select lone parents as a specific target group.

In summary, low income and finding the time to combine childrearing with a full time job are major problems for lone parents in Italy. But lone parents are not high on the political agenda and it is therefore difficult for them to make their demands felt.

The Netherlands

Marry Niphuis Nell, Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau; 1989 figures from W. Relou, Ministry of Housing

Various different definitions of a lone parent family are used in the Netherlands. Official statistics are often published using a definition which includes cohabiting couples and unmarried children of any age but this is not the same as the definitions used for policy purposes or by those studying lone parent families.

The Housing Needs Survey (WBO) collects data which can be analysed to provide information on the 'standard' definition. It is carried out every four years. At the time of writing the latest is 1989 but full details are not yet available. However, the Ministry of Housing was able to provide the basic numbers which show that over the four year period 1985-1989, there appears to have been little change in the proportion of all families with a child under the age of 18 who are lone parent families. It is probably still around 10-11%.

However, there have been changes in policy and in the policy climate which are having repercussions on lone parent families. Many of these have to do with encouraging women's employment, such as the Parental Leave Act of 1990, and a "historic" change in the Autumn of 1989 when the central government agreed to provide money to help local authorities create more child care centres.

This concern with employment arises partly because, apart from Ireland, the Netherlands has the lowest proportion of lone mothers in employment (32% plus 16% unemployed according to the 1989 LFS), reflecting the generally low level of women's employment and the fact that most of it is part-time. Indeed, men in the Netherlands are also more likely to work part-time than in other EC countries, although the general level of unemployment has fallen in recent years.

Because of their low level of employment, a relatively high proportion of lone mothers are dependent on social assistance

In 1985 over 90% of widowed mothers' income came from widow's benefit but almost 60% of divorced and never-married lone mothers' income (and virtually none of lone fathers') came from social assistance – a national scheme with some local discretion.

The level of social assistance is linked to the minimum wage. There has been some debate over the relative rates paid to couples and to lone parents. Couples receive 100% of the net minimum wage, lone parents 90%, and a single person 70%. Family allowances are payable in addition but the rationale for the difference between a lone parent and a single person is they are not enough to cover the cost of a child. However, the difference between the lone parent and couple rates has also been criticised on the grounds that it assumes that an extra adult only costs an extra 10% of the minimum wage.

A Bill making its way through Parliament would remove the entitlement to widowed mothers' benefit (and widowed fathers who have recently acquired entitlement) from those with a child over age 12. On the other hand, as far as social assistance is concerned, expenditure in recent years has not increased so that there is less concern with the financial consequences of divorce than there was a few years ago.

However, a Bill resulting from such pressures, which would require local authorities to recover some of the social assistance money paid to lone parents from the 'absent' parent is still making its way through Parliament. (Under present rules local authorities are empowered but not obliged to recover the money.) The Bill applies only to the recovery of maintenance which has been awarded by the courts and does not require lone parents to 'name the father' in order to enable the social assistance authorities to recover the money from him.

Recipients are normally expected to look for a job but this rule is not generally applied to lone mothers with a child under age 12. Instead, positive measures to encourage recipients into employment have recently been enacted, although not yet put into effect. There will be a contribution towards the costs of a child's schooling, child care and towards the costs of employment – all measures which could particularly help lone parents, given that a high proportion are recipients.

Maintenance is only rarely a major source of income for lone mothers. Because it is taken into account in the calculation of income for social assistance purposes it mainly benefits those in employment. However, for these mothers it can be an important supplement and current proposals to abolish the role of the 19 Councils for Child Care and Protection could therefore be detrimental to lone parents. These councils do not 'advance' the child support but they do pursue the 'absent' parent on behalf of the lone parent and pay the money over to her (him).

Other provisions which treat lone parents differently include favourable tax treatment of lone parents with a child under age 12 who are entitled to a higher tax allowance than couples or single people. The situation is more complex for those with a child over age 12 as lone parents are entitled to less than sole breadwinner couples but to more than dual income couples or single people.

The universal family allowance is biased towards larger families which tends to disadvantage lone parents because they tend to have smaller families. In 1990 the rate for the first child was raised in relation to the rates for subsequent children. This was done in order to compensate for the fact that it had previously been frozen but it nevertheless benefits lone parents who are more likely than couples to have only one child.

There is not a great deal of up-to date information about the relative incomes (adjusted for household size) of lone parent families but a survey of living conditions in 1986 by the Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau found that on almost every count (residential situation, financial and social position, circle of friends, leisure activities, life in general) lone parents were much less likely to be satisfied than couple families. In 1985, they were also far less likely to own their own homes (16% compared with 59%).

Overall, there have been some positive changes in policy towards lone parent families over the past few years. These include general measures to stimulate women's employment such as the introduction of parental leave, lengthening of maternity leave, a commitment to public expenditure on child care and plans to provide extra assistance for social assistance recipients who wish to take a job, and a higher rate of family allowance for the first child.

Against this, however, has to be set the proposal to abolish the role of the Councils for Child Care and Protection with respect to child support – a measure, which if approved by Parliament, could be damaging both to lone parents actually in employment and to those receiving social assistance who would like to move into employment.

Portugal

Maria Alice Botao, Commissao para a Igualdade e Direitos das Mulheres, Lisbon

There is very little information about lone parent families in Portugal. The Labour Force Survey 1989 suggests that they may total 10% of families with children, which is high compared with the other 'Southern' Member States but may reflect the rising and relatively high proportion of births outside marriage in Portugal. It is also possible that the divorce rate is higher than in Greece, Spain or Italy, although there are not enough comparable statistics to be able to state this with certainty.

That there are social differences between Portugal and the other 'Southern' states is clear from the Labour Force Survey. The economic activity rate of mothers in general in Portugal is much higher than in these other countries and is in fact one of the highest. It is similar to France, the rate in both cases being around two thirds.

The economic activity rate of lone mothers is a little higher than of all mothers – around 7 out of 10 were economically active in 1989 but this is not as high as in France (or in Denmark, where the economic activity rate of lone mothers is similar to France and the rate of all mothers is the highest).

The main source of income for lone parents is employment, although most of them are women and the earnings of women are generally lower than of men, which means that employment does not necessarily prevent hardship.

There is very little evidence about the level of maintenance payments, although it is known that non-payment is a problem and that there is no machinery other than the Courts for enforcing the payments.

There is a contributory social security scheme which provides the same level of family allowances to working lone parents as to other families with children. It also provides various other benefits, such as 30 days leave a year to provide 'urgent and necessary care' for sick or injured children under ten years of age, and survivors' pensions.

Children of non-working parents are entitled to nearly the same benefits as those of working parents but these benefits are subject to a means-test and therefore do not cover all those who may need them. The health system, however, is virtually free for everybody.

There are also various other benefits which are provided for low income families and lone parents may benefit from these on grounds of low income. These include school meals, books, and transport. The system of tax allowances tends to penalise lone parents but child care costs are deductible.

In summary, lone parents still do not enjoy any particular protection, are not entitled to special subsidies and do not have priority in access to jobs or housing. However, they do have priority in access to child care facilities.

UK

Jane Millar, University of Bath

Information about lone parents is relatively plentiful but most of it relates to Great Britain rather than to the UK. However, because of the small size of Northern Ireland, the UK totals are unlikely to be much different even if there are major differences between Northern Ireland and GB.

A more or less consistent definition is used for most policy and statistical purposes. This definition is very close to the 'standard' one, although the definition of a child is slightly different. There are several relevant annual official statistical surveys and a special survey in 1989 of 1800 lone parents also provides information on a wide range of topics.[16]

The proportion of all families with a child under age 18 now appears to be higher in Great Britain than in any other EC country. It rose from 14% in 1985 (the figure quoted last time) to 17% in 1989 – and preliminary results for 1990 suggest that it has risen again to 19%.

The increase appears to have been due to a particularly large rise in the 'never-married' group of lone mothers – from 23% to 35% (although some of these may be separated from a cohabiting partner). The proportion of widows fell – to 7%, as did the proportion of divorced and separated mothers – to 58%, which means that the latter are still by far the largest group.

There was also a rise in the proportion of lone parents under age 25 who formed exactly one fifth of all lone parents (22% of lone

16 Bradshaw J. and Millar J., Lone Parent Families in the UK, Department of Social Security, HMSO 1991.

mothers) in 1989. But age varies greatly according to marital status. About half of the unmarried mothers were under age 25 compared with only about 1 in 20 of those who were divorced.

Because of the rise in young and unmarried lone mothers, the age of children in such families has changed as well. Very similar proportions of lone and couple families now have a child under school age (about 4 in 10). However, lone parents are still much more likely to have only one child (55% compared with 39%).

Great Britain is one of the few countries where lone mothers are less likely to be economically active, or employed, than mothers in general. Indeed, the labour force participation rate of all mothers is among the highest in the EC while the labour force participation rate of lone mothers is among the lowest.

Bradshaw and Millar identified the factors that affected employment rates, such as the level of predicted pay, age of children, attitudes to the needs of children, lone mothers' level of education etc., and estimated that up to 7 in 10 lone mothers could be employed (compared with 4 in 10 at the time) if there were adequate jobs and child care. However, not all lone mothers wanted, or were able to be employed.

Reflecting their respective employment patterns, lone parents are much more likely to be dependent on state benefits than couples. This is also because they are much more likely to have a low paid job than the average male worker. On average couples with two children drew 86% of their income from employment and 5% from social security (meaning any state benefit). For lone parents with one or two children, the figures were about half and a third respectively.

However, these figures do not take account of the distribution of income within the lone parent group, around 7 in 10 of whom are dependent on Income Support (social assistance), which is payable without a 'seeking work' test to lone parents until their children are 16. The numbers dependent on this basic benefit have risen faster than the total. For example, in 1971, about 37% of the total were dependent on Income Support (then called Supplementary Benefit) compared with 67% in 1989.

For lone parents in paid employment there is an additional tax allowance which is the equivalent of the extra allowance paid to a married man. There is also a means-tested benefit, Family Credit, which in practice is mainly payable to one earner couples and to lone parents. There is also the universal Child Benefit (family allowance) which is now paid at a higher rate for the first than for other children and the smaller additional One-parent benefit (payable for the family not for each child).

Similarly, although maintenance payments were rarely a major source of income for lone parents, about 3 in 10 lone mothers (excluding widows) received regular maintenance payments in 1989 and, among these, the average amount received was about £27 a week.

Overall, however, low employment rates, low pay, increased reliance on the subsistence income provided by Income Support and little financial support from former partners mean low income for lone parents and a greater risk of poverty than for couple families.

In 1979 about 3 in 10 lone parents had incomes less than half the average. By 1988 it was nearly 6 in 10. The proportion of couples with children also doubled but at much lower levels – from about 1 in 10 to nearly 2 in 10 (incomes adjusted for household size and after housing costs). The proportion of lone parents owning or buying their own home is also much lower than that of couples – 35% compared with 76%.

The major policy change since the last report is the passage of the Child Support Act 1991, which will be implemented in 1992 and 1993. Although the provisions build on the long-standing 'liable relative' rules within the Income Support scheme (which enabled the government to reclaim some of the benefit payments made to lone parents from the 'absent' one), the Act goes a good deal further and covers other means-tested benefits as well.

Its major provisions include: the establishment of a Child Support Agency with responsibility for setting, collecting and enforcing child support payments; the introduction of a formula for the calculation of the amount of child support due, with reduced amounts payable according to the income and (new) family responsibilities of the 'absent' parent; and a requirement that all families claiming the means-tested benefits should use the agency, although others may do so if they wish.

The main gain will therefore be to the Treasury as benefit expenditure is reduced by

the amount of child support collected. Lone parents receiving Income Support (probably nearly three quarters now) do not benefit directly as the child support payment counts as income and therefore reduces the Income Support payable by the same amount.

Indeed, lone parents (in practice, mothers) will be penalised if they refuse to name the father because the personal allowance element of Income Support will be reduced by 20% (for six months and by 10% for a further 12 months). However, the sanction will not apply where there is sufficient evidence that pursuing maintenance from the absent parent would cause 'harm or undue distress'.

The Act establishes the obligation to support biological children as unconditional and lasting as long as the children are dependent. Thus financial obligations are unrelated to issues such as fault, access, nature of relationship (unmarried and married couples are treated the same). While many might agree with this in principle, it remains to be seen what the reaction will be in practice.

The official attitude towards the employment of lone mothers remains one of 'neutrality', although the extent to which policies really are neutral may be debatable. Proposed changes to the benefit rules, in particular to the Family Credit rules (which will reduce the number of qualifying hours of work per week from 24 to 16) are designed to make part-time (strictly speaking, short full-time) employment more of an option for lone parents.

However, other policies to help lone mothers into employment, such as the provision of child care, have not been pursued and there is not much interest in education and training issues, although lone parents can get some help with child care costs on some government training schemes and the government has recently provided money to help the National Council for One Parent Families (a charity) run 'back-to-work' courses.

In summary, during the 1980s the number of lone parent families has continued to rise. The proportion dependent on Income Support and thus the state costs of supporting them have also risen, while at the same time the proportion with relatively low living standards has also risen. New policies are being developed but relative poverty among lone parents, especially lone mothers, is likely to remain a problem in the near future.

8 Summary and conclusion

Numbers

This report shows that there are wide variations between EC countries in the proportions of all families with children under age 18 who are lone parent families. At the end of the 1980s, the numbers ranged from at least 17% in the UK to around 5% in Greece.

However, demographic trends, such as the rise in the proportion of births outside marriage, and, in some countries, in the divorce rate, suggest that the proportion of lone parent families is likely to rise in some of the countries which have, up till now, experienced relatively low numbers of lone parent families.

On the other hand, in some countries which have experienced relatively high numbers of lone parent families, certain trends associated with the rise of lone parents appear to be stabilising. In Denmark, for example, both the proportion of births outside marriage and the divorce rate have changed little over the past five years.

However, this is not universally true. In the UK, for example, although the divorce rate has only crept up during the 1980s, the proportion of births outside marriage is still mounting fast. Even though many of these are to cohabiting couples, 'never-married' mothers nevertheless account for a large part of the rise in the number of lone parents in the UK in recent years.

The decline in the number of widows with dependent children over the post World War II period led to a U shaped curve in the trend proportion of lone parent families in several countries. But it appears, in some other countries, to be coinciding with the rise in the proportion of the 'new' types of lone parent, thus creating a period where the total is static but the composition of the group is changing. Italy appears to be a country where this is happening.

Only a few countries were able to provide more detailed up-to-date figures but, in those that did, it can be said that:

The vast majority – probably around 9 in 10 – of lone parents are women. The more carefully they are defined, the higher the proportion of women appears to be. For example, in the 1989 report, many of those countries, where 8 out of 10 were women used a definition that included unmarried children of any age. This results in a higher proportion of widowed lone parents, among whom men are more common than among the divorced or the unmarried (and this is in spite of men's higher mortality rate).

Children in lone parent families tend to be older than children in families headed by a couple, largely because divorced, separated and widowed lone parents start off as couple-headed families. However, this may not be true in countries with high proportions of 'never-married' lone parents. In the UK, for example, where the proportion of the 'never-married' group has grown substantially during the 1980s, the proportion of lone parent families with a child under school age is now roughly the same as that of couple-headed families.

Lone parent families are much more likely to have only one child and less likely to have three or more children than couple-headed families. They are therefore less likely to benefit from the 'pro-natalist' family allowances designed to encourage larger families, which exist in many EC countries, particularly France and Belgium, but, to a lesser extent, in several other countries as well.

Policies

Family allowances designed to encourage larger families provide a good example of the way that policies may have unintended consequences for lone parent families. It has not been possible, in this report, to cover all the policies which may

do so but it is clear from the **Country sketches** in Part Two above that these do exist.

Indeed, the basic structures of social protection systems, such as the balance between means-tested and non-means-tested, or between contributory (social insurance) and non-contributory, benefits, or the respective roles of tax allowances and cash benefits, may all have unintended consequences for lone parents or particular groups of lone parents.

Unfortunately, it is not always possible to determine what the intention behind a particular policy was. For example, policies deliberately designed to discriminate against lone parents in order to discourage their existence appear to be rare, although it is much harder to judge the extent to which the existence of this sort of attitude within a country acts as a brake on the development of policies to help them.

One reason that lone parents have attracted special attention is that several studies have found that they run a high risk of 'poverty' (using the word here in a very general sense) compared with many other family types. But the extent of 'poverty' among lone parents appears to vary between countries. The reasons need to be explored far more fully than was possible in an overview of the kind presented in this report, although the outline of policies set out in Part Two and summarised here is intended to provide a step in this direction.

Few policies directly target lone parents but lone parents may be specifically recognised within policies targeted at the broader groups – women, mothers, parents, low earners, 'poor' people etc., to which they belong.

Those social security benefits which are targeted specifically on lone parents are mostly designed for particular groups of lone parents. They include, for example, the Irish Deserted Wives Benefit – based on social insurance contributions – which it is hard to imagine could exist in any country other than one which prohibits divorce.

Similarly, the traditional widows' and widowers' benefits are also based on social insurance contributions and these tend to provide better benefits to lone parents than many other forms of assistance available to them. But widows and widowers with dependent children form a dwindling proportion of lone parent families.

The benefits are also subject to conflicting pressures. Originally developed as widows' benefits, 'equal treatment' may require them to be extended to widowers, as recently happened in the Netherlands, for example. On the other hand, 'equal treatment' could equally lead to their abolition. This has happened in Denmark, and the Netherlands is planning to restrict entitlement to those with a child under age 12.

The systems of 'advance child support' in Denmark, Germany, and France, and, most recently, in Belgium; which do not usually provide lone parents with enough to live on, and do not directly benefit lone parents dependent on means-tested benefits, may nevertheless provide a useful guaranteed supplement to lone parents in employment. However, the rules vary a good deal so that the proportion of lone parents who benefit also varies a good deal from country to country.

The proposed machinery for paying child support in the UK and the existing (but threatened) Dutch machinery do not provide the same guarantee in that they do not 'advance' the payments until the money has been retrieved from the 'absent' parent but may still help the minority of lone parents in employment in these countries to receive a regular supplement. However, there are a number of controversial aspects to the UK scheme, which are referred to in Part Two.

The French API and the Irish Lone Parent Allowance are the only specific benefits (both means-tested) designed to guarantee an income to any type of lone parent who qualifies, although the function performed by these benefits may be similar to that performed by the special rates of social assistance for lone parents referred to below.

The qualifying rules for API restrict entitlement to those who are either pregnant, have a child under age three, or have become lone parents within the last year. It therefore only covers a minority of lone parents, and in practice only about 1 in 10 receive it.

However, given that it is a means-tested benefit for poorer lone parents, it may partly be a good sign that only a minority of lone parents in France receive the API. For those who do receive it, it is worth a good deal more than the RMI which was introduced in France in 1989 to guarantee a means-tested subsistence income for people in general.

Among the benefits with a specific component for lone parents are the extra family allowances, payable, for example, in Denmark and the UK, albeit at different rates and with

different structures. The higher rate for the first child recently introduced into the basic family allowance in the UK is also likely to benefit lone parent families, although this was not the reason for its introduction.

Within some of the social assistance schemes (eg Belgium, UK, Netherlands), lone parents are paid a specific rate. Whether this is favourable may be controversial partly because there is no generally recognised measure of the costs of being a lone parent as compared with other family types – or, indeed of being a couple as compared with a single person. A number of different 'equivalence' scales are used in poverty and income studies (see Part One), but there does not appear to be any consensus about which of these is most accurate or whether an objective measure is in fact possible.

In several countries lone parents are entitled to additional or higher tax allowances, although sometimes the balance of advantage may be difficult to calculate . For example, in some countries it is also the case that one earner couples can split their income and therefore pay tax at a lower rate than a single person earning the same amount (see, for example, Belgium, Ireland and West Germany).

In addition, childcare is subject to tax allowances in certain circumstances in at least four EC countries and in some countries there are specific tax allowances for children. These may be especially helpful to lone parents in employment. However, the role of tax allowances as a policy instrument for helping lone parents is to some extent controversial – for example, in many countries tax allowances tend to benefit the better off and it is therefore argued that other policy instruments are more appropriate.

Among the policies which do not necessarily contain a specific component for lone parents but which may nevertheless have a crucial bearing on their situation are those aimed at giving women equal employment opportunities, such as parental leave, leave to care for sick children, good quality child care services, etc. These have not been covered in detail in this report because they have been the subject of the EC Child Care Network[17]. But this is not to deny their significance.

Indeed, the 1989 report on lone parent families in the EC concluded that, in the long run, policies which promoted equality at work and in the home, together with generous and appropriate family allowances, were most likely to remove the basic causes of lone parents' insecurity. Removing obstacles to, and creating opportunities for, employment, which would include the provision of good quality child care services, were an essential part of such a strategy.

Similarly, lone parents are frequently dependent on benefits and services for low income families (and sometimes informal guidelines or practices may give them priority within such schemes). For example, some sort of national subsistence income scheme (generally referred to as 'social assistance' in this report, although this is not always the sense in which the term is used), be it RMI in France, Income Support in the UK, benefits paid under the ABW scheme in the Netherlands etc, provides a safety net for lone parents, which simply does not exist in some countries (e.g. Greece, Spain and Italy).

The terms on which it is available and the alternatives obviously also affect the role it plays and these vary from one country to another. In Germany, for example, less than a quarter of lone parents are dependent on it at any one time whereas in the UK, the figure is approaching three quarters.

The economic activity rates of lone mothers vary dramatically from one country to another, from 84/5% in France and Denmark to 37% in Ireland. The extent to which benefits and services are linked to employment may therefore be crucial for lone parents who are out of the labour force – for example, whether the health system is free or paid through social insurance contributions.

However, the extent to which policies may themselves be the cause of different economic activity rates, or the result 'choice' or 'constraint', has not been explored here, although some of the facts presented in Part Two may be indicative. In Denmark, for example, where mothers in general have a very high economic activity rate, time has become a policy issue and policy-makers are concerned with improving conditions for combining work and family life.

The economic activity figures nevertheless suggest that similar policies might have very different effects in different countries. Equally, if the type of person who becomes a lone parent varies from country to country, the impact of policies is also likely to vary.

[17] Commission's Background Report on Child Care in the European Community ISEC/B30/91, November 1991 summarises and refers to the original reports.

In practice, it may be the combination of policies pursued which needs to be examined in order to understand the situation of lone parent families. For example, family allowances, child support and the availability of good quality child care services might not, by themselves, provide a living income. But they might determine whether a part time job was viable, and, for lone parents in employment, tip the balance between a comfortable and an uncomfortable life.

To be explored

The range of policies which could benefit lone parents is very wide. But just as it was not possible to examine all the policies which might be to their disadvantage, so it was not possible to examine all the wider-ranging policies which might be to their advantage.

Many of the policies already mentioned above could usefully be explored in greater detail than was possible here. But there are a number of others that have only been touched on in the country sketches and which have not been mentioned in this summary. Some of these may be explored by other Observatories and Networks but it is then important to ensure that the effects on lone parents are taken into account by such broader studies.

Housing policies and rent subsidies, for example, need to be studied. Many countries provided figures to show that lone parents were far less likely to own, or to be in the process of buying, their own home than families headed by a couple. However, whether this matters or not depends on the quality and price of the alternative.

Several countries mentioned that lone parents were likely to benefit from rent subsidies or to live in public housing, although usually on grounds of low income or because they had children rather than because they were lone parents. But, several of these also mentioned that lone parents were more likely to live in poor quality housing 'ghettos'. It would therefore be necessary to explore the situation futher in order to reach a judgement about the overall situation.

This report has taken a static view. In other words it has presented a snapshot of lone parents. However, it is important to take a dynamic view as well. One study in the UK suggested that half of lone parents experience a change in their status within a five year period[18] but this figure is now out of date and may not, in any case, be applicable to other countries.

The report to the Commission on the single women in Europe[19] also stressed the need to take a dynamic view and to examine other caring responsibilities. The need to care for elderly parents, for example, may coincide or follow a period of childrearing and may reinforce its effects.

Taking a dynamic view also means studying the duration and the routes out of the lone parent state, and the long term effects on living standards including pension entitlement. Provisions for splitting pensions on divorce and for protecting the pension rights of those who take time out of the labour force to care for others also need to be studied.

Although, for certain purposes, it can be useful to speak of lone parents as a group, it is also important to note their diversity. Different types of lone parent within a country or from different regions and ethnic backgrounds may have different needs as well as needs in common. These need to be studied.

Denmark exemplifies the point well. There, diverse family types are well tolerated, a very high proportion of lone parents are in employment, and their incomes (adjusted for family size) are well above the average for a one earner couple – in fact closer to the average for a two earner couple family. But there is a minority who are dependent on social assistance for long periods of time; they have a low level of education, no job training and despair of improving their situation.

The different training needs of lone parents in different situations also need to be studied. Those re-entering the labour force may have different needs from those who started their family before they were old enough to enter it in the first place. In a few countries (eg France and Italy) schemes are run (or planned) under equal opportunities for women programmes and in others, they may be linked to unemployment programmes. In Denmark there is a special education benefit for recipients of social assistance. The successes and failures of such schemes could provide important lessons for other countries.

18 Ermisch J., Jenkins S., and Wright R.E. Analysis of the Dynamics of Lone Parenthood, in Lone-Parent Families: The Economics Challenge, OECD, Paris 1990.

19 Millar J., The Socio-economic Situation of Single Women in Europe, Final Report to the European Commission, February 1990.

Conclusion

Whether the Commission decides to develop policies in any of the areas mentioned or whether it simply decides to encourage the exchange of ideas, it is necessary to have more comparable information about lone parent families in the European Community.

This report was concerned with lone parent families in particular but they are only part of the wider pattern of changing family forms and are themselves a diverse group. Keeping an eye on them therefore means keeping an eye on the kaleidoscope which family patterns have recently become.

However, in some countries there is not even enough information to make a reasonable assessment of the number of lone parents, let alone how well they are surviving financially compared with other family types. At the very least, therefore, the EC Labour Force Survey should be developed so as to provide comparable up-to-date information about lone parents and their economic activities.

European Family & Social Policy Unit

The European Family and Social Policy Unit was established in 1992 by the Family Policy Studies Centre and the University of Birmingham to build on both the Centre's existing work and the developing links between the University and other European institutions.

The Unit includes among its objectives the analysis of significant European social and demographic trends, the study of their implications for policy and practice, and the examination of policy innovations.

It has been established at a time of profound change in Europe. Initially, most of the Unit's focus will be on the European Community: the existing twelve member states and those countries, such as Sweden, that are likely to join the Community within the coming few years. This will be complemented by an interest in Central and Eastern Europe.

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